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### Small Faces

**Citation for published version:**

Murray, J 2015, Small Faces. in B Nowlan & Z Finch (eds), *Directory of World Cinema: Scotland*. 1st edn, Intellect Ltd., Bristol/Chicago, pp. 247-250.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Directory of World Cinema: Scotland

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Murray, J. (2015). Small Faces. In B. Nowlan, & Z. Finch (Eds.), *Directory of World Cinema: Scotland*. (1st ed., pp. 247-250). Bristol/Chicago: Intellect Ltd .

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Title: *Small Faces*

Country of Origin: UK

Year: 1996

Language: English

Production Companies: Billy MacKinnon, BBC Films, Skyline, Glasgow Film Fund

Filming Location: Glasgow

Director: Gillies MacKinnon

Producers: Steve Clark-Hall, Billy MacKinnon

Screenwriters: Gillies MacKinnon, Billy MacKinnon

Cinematographer: John de Borman

Art Director: Pat Campbell

Editor: Scott Thomas

Runtime: 108 minutes

Cast (Starring): Iain Robertson, Joe McFadden, Steven Duffy

**Synopsis:** Alan, Bobby, and Lex are three teenage brothers growing up in late-1960s Glasgow. Each young man has a very different relationship to the notoriously violent youth gang culture that influenced the **collective life of the** city during this period. Bobby, the eldest of the siblings, **is both the** most dangerous **and** endangered of the three in this regard. An emotionally scarred, illiterate school drop-out, he has found a tenuous measure of identity and self-respect through acting as second-in-command of the Glen, the teenage gang associated with the part of Glasgow in which the brothers live. Middle brother Alan, by contrast, is a studious, sensitive, and creatively gifted scholar bound for an undergraduate place at the city's prestigious Art School. Lex, the youngest of the trio, bridges the two poles that his brothers personify, possessing something of Alan's artistic curiosity and talent but also prone to the kind of violent unpredictability that afflicts Bobby. When Lex inadvertently starts a feud with a neighbouring gang (an air pistol round that the boy fires hits that group's leader in the face), the consequences for the siblings vary markedly. Bobby is stabbed and killed by members of the rival gang; Alan is compelled to act temporarily as a kind of war artist for the Glen, but manages to extricate himself unscathed and so begin his art school studies; Lex appears to learn the error of his ways and readies himself to devote the remainder of his adolescence **to honing his** nascent artistic talents.

**Critique:** It is no accident that *Small Faces* begins and ends with scenes of Lex, the film's central character, hard at work drawing. Siblings Gillies and Bobby MacKinnon's autobiographical account of

growing up on and around the mean streets of gang-ridden late-1960s Glasgow frames itself as a study of the ways in which acts of artistic creation possess the capacity to simultaneously record *and* reconfigure lived moments within individual and collective human experience. Moreover, despite the film's strong element of autobiography, *Small Faces* posits an understanding of art's social origins and impact within which the idea of reconfiguration seems to be of more importance than that of record. *Although* the movie's opening credits unfold over a vivid portrait of a particular place as it existed at a particular time (Lex's felt-tip pen portrait of Glasgow's gangland boundaries circa 1968), the first thing that viewers actually see is the young man's hand manoeuvring the instrument with which he creates that image. The consequent argument that works of art show the world not as *it actually is, but rather*, as it appears once radically mediated and manipulated by the resources of individual imagination, is exemplified as much by the entire audio-visual structure of the MacKinnon brothers' movie as it is by the colourful introductory spectacle of Lex's map within the film itself. On one hand, the wildly skewed physical perspective that characterises the boy's drawing might potentially be explained away as an adolescent inability to master the demands of formal technique. But on the other, the subsequent preponderance of quasi-expressionist camera angles and bravura *trompe l'œil*-style perspectival illusions that pepper *Small Faces* *stems* from an abundance of technical mastery, not naivety, on the filmmakers' part. Within a wider Scottish cinematic context, *Small Faces* thus lies closer to European art cinema-inspired works such as Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999) or Peter Mullan's *Orphans* (1999) than it does to the more classically social realist portraits of urban deprivation and violence essayed by writers and directors such as Paul Laverty, Ken Loach, and Peter McDougall.

Like his subsequent *part-Scottish-set and -funded* feature project, the WWI drama *Regeneration* (1997), *Small Faces* testifies to Gillies MacKinnon's considerable directorial talent and ambition. Yet, to date, critics of Scottish cinema have largely overlooked his work. This fact seems doubly strange when one considers that MacKinnon was by far and away the most prolific Scottish filmmaker of the 1990s, directing five theatrical features and a further three films for television during the period in question. Part of the explanation for Scottish film scholars' comparative neglect of such an extensive oeuvre perhaps lies in its pronouncedly cosmopolitan character. The latter involves both the production backgrounds to, and narrative settings of, many of the movies that MacKinnon has made. *Hideous Kinky* (1998), for example, is a British-French co-production with a story that for the most part unfolds in early-1970s Morocco, while *A Simple Twist of Fate* (1994) was a Hollywood studio-funded, American-set remake of George Eliot's *nineteenth-century* novel *Silas Marner*. The lack of critical attention paid to such *films* highlights a general issue to do with the very particular terms of reference and definition that Scottish cinema scholars have traditionally adopted within their work. For most critical writers, the canon of *features* taken to constitute the field of Scottish Cinema is defined with primary reference to *considerations* of narrative setting and content, rather than the national/cultural background of a given filmmaker or makers. For this reason, Bill Douglas' *Childhood Trilogy* (1972-79) has been examined extensively within Scottish cinema studies, while that *director's* only other feature, 1987's *Comrades*, a project set in southern England and Australia, has not. Similarly, Bill Forsyth's first four Scottish-set *films* have been explored far more extensively than the trilogy of American-set and -funded movies that the director produced during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s, the period during which figures like Douglas, Forsyth, and MacKinnon were most active, it was possible to rationalise critical neglect of their non-Scottish output by arguing that such international careers and oeuvres were glaring exceptions, rather than the general rule, within an infant, tentatively expanding Scottish production sector. But that position is far harder to justify in the twenty-first century: today, a larger and more diverse local industry routinely attracts non-Scottish filmmakers to shoot movies in Scotland on one hand, while also allowing many native writers and directors the opportunity to begin careers **that subsequently create chances to work** within a range of different film industries around the globe on the other. Some contemporary **scholarship**, such as David Martin-Jones' 2009 book *Scotland: Global Cinema*, has begun to respond positively to this phenomena, not least by arguing that the **criteria** by which we might choose to define a particular film and/or filmmaker as 'Scottish' are not self-evident and static, but multiple and mutable in nature. One way in which that critical process could be usefully developed in future would involve more **sustained critical attention** being paid to peripatetic Scottish filmmaking careers such as that of Gillies MacKinnon.

**Reference:** David Martin-Jones, *Scotland: Global Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Jonathan Murray